

Surviving Jim Crow: In-Depth Essay

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Oklahoma City, OK
"Colored" water
fountains were
fixtures throughout
the South during the
Jim Crow era.

The Supreme Court's sanctioning of segregation (by upholding the "separate but equal" language in state laws regarding public schools) in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896, and the federal government's failure to enact anti-lynching laws or to supervise voter election methods in the South, meant that southern blacks were left to their own devices for surviving Jim Crow. The lynchings, segregation, political disfranchisement, and economic impoverishment were compounded by the social humiliations of a rigidly imposed color line that dominated black-white relations. From 1876 to the 1960s, the story of that survival is one of great courage by African Americans. It was a daily battle for one's life, self-respect, and basic civil rights. For most African Americans, this struggle forged a strength of character and an incredible sense of endurance that enabled them not only to survive individually but to prevail culturally as well. It is an epic tale of endurance and survival that ranks among the great, tragic feats of heroism in American and world history.

Living "Behind the Veil:" Tactics of Accommodation

For the vast majority of southern blacks, the terror of Jim Crow meant that they were forced to live "behind the veil," in the words of the black intellectual, W.E.B. Du Bois. Scholars refer to these masking tactics as "dissembling," or a psychological ploy in which blacks assumed the appearances of non-confrontation. For Du Bois, this life of masking created a "double consciousness" for blacks: the awareness, driven home by the racist institutions and all-present racial stereotypes, that one was both an American and yet deemed inferior by the larger society because of one's African origins. American but not American. Du Bois writes of it this way: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

To cope with the fact that whites refused to acknowledge the humanity of black Americans, most blacks had to mask their true feelings and actual personalities whenever they were in the presence of white people. Sometimes, this masking meant shuffling and feigning irresponsibility; and sometimes it meant turning the other cheek and walking away rather than responding to white insults. But almost always, it meant conforming to a pattern of racial etiquette in day-to-day affairs.

Blacks avoided looking whites in the eyes; and black males and youths knew not to look, even indirectly, at white women or to touch them accidentally. Blacks were expected to stare at the ground when addressing whites of both sexes. Black customers usually were not served first in stores when white customers were present. They usually were not allowed to try on clothing in white businesses, as it was commonly believed that white customers would not purchase clothes that black customers had tried on. Black shoppers almost always were expected to wait patiently for white clerks to address them before speaking. Adult African Americans were seldom afforded titles of respect by whites, such as the terms "Mister," "Mrs.," or "Miss." They were instead referred to by their first names or by the words "boy," "girl," "auntie," "uncle," and, frequently, "nigger."

Most blacks fully understood that "putting on the face" in the presence of whites was one of the many tactics they used to survive. It is also clear that few blacks internalized this obligatory pretense, and that almost all blacks deeply resented it. Behind every mask stood an African

American seething with anger. Controlling that anger so that it did not dominate one's life was a battle that most blacks fought every day in Jim Crow America.

Often, blacks were shocked and astonished when they first encountered the hatred and contempt that whites felt for them. It usually happened first in childhood when some act of humiliation for no apparent reason by whites awoke them to Jim Crow. Others, especially those who were shielded by family and community, first experienced white racism as adults. The New England-born W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, remembered with anger his first encounter with white superiority in Nashville:

I quite accidentally jostled a white woman as I passed. She was not hurt in the slightest, nor even particularly inconvenienced. Immediately in accord with my New England training, I raised my hat and begged her pardon. I acted quite instinctively and with genuine regret for a little mistake. The woman was furious; why I never knew; somehow, I cannot say how, I had transgressed the interracial mores of the South. Was it because I showed no submissiveness? Did I fail to debase myself utterly and eat spiritual dirt? Did I act as equal among equals? I do not know. I only sensed scorn and hate: the kind of despising which a dog might incur.

African-American parents struggled mightily to protect their children from the humiliating image of blacks depicted in circuses, minstrel shows, song, and in twentieth century films and radio programs. In popular culture, black people were portrayed as lazy and silly bumpkins, high-strutting dandies who foolishly mimicked white elites, or simple-minded and contented "darkies" who simply loved their white patrons. But, how does a parent tell one's children to live behind a veil or to put on a mask of deference and become like a shadow person instead of a real person in the face of all whites? How does a parent raise one's child to be self-respecting and a person of confidence and promise when to act this way around white people would lead to beatings, job discrimination, or even death? When did black parents first tell their little boys to never look at white girls or talk to them directly? How did they explain why their children should be forced to behave one way in the presence of whites and, yet, step out from behind the veil when at home with family and friends?

The great African-American writer **Richard Wright** vividly remembered his first understanding of what it meant to be black in a white world. It happened in Arkansas when he was just a small boy. One day he and his friends got into a rock-throwing fight with some little white boys who lived across the tracks in the nice part of town. The black kids threw cinders from the rail tracks, and the white boys threw cinders, too, but also broken milk bottles. One bottle hit Wright in the head. He was stunned because it seemed that the boys on his side knew not to throw bottles because that would be unfair and might seriously hurt the little white boys. The white boys did not seem to care. Wright had to be rushed to the doctor for stitches. But, the greatest shock came to him that evening when he ran down the road to meet his mama, who was returning home after working all day in "the white folks' kitchen." He knew she would understand. He knew that she would tell him what to do next.

I grabbed her hand and babbled out the whole story. She examined my wound, then slapped me. 'How come yuh didn't hide?' she asked me. 'How come you always fightin'?' I was outraged, and bawled. Between sobs, I told her that I didn't have any trees or hedges to hide behind. There wasn't a thing I could have used as a trench. And you couldn't throw very far when you was hiding behind the brick pillars of a house. She grabbed a barrel stave, dragged me home, stripped me naked, and beat me till I had a fever of one hundred and two. She would smack my rump with the stave, and, while the skin was still smarting, imparted to me gems of Jim Crow wisdom. I was never to throw cinders any more. I was never to fight any more wars. I was never, never, under any conditions, to fight

white folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle. Didn't I know she was working hard every day in the hot kitchens of the white folks to make money to take care of me? When was I ever going to learn to be a good boy? She couldn't be bothered with my fights. She finished by telling me that I ought to be thankful to God as long as I lived that they didn't kill me.

Few blacks confronted Jim Crowism and the color line all around them directly or defiantly. To do so risked being lynched, turned off the place if you were a sharecropper, fired from your job, denied credit, or beaten. Not even black politicians, prosperous entrepreneurs, or successful black landowners violated the southern color line, enforced as it was by custom, law, and violence in the years from 1876 to the 1960s. Even the most prosperous blacks learned to live in unpainted houses and to not look too successful or else they would incur the wrath of less prosperous whites in the area. To drive a new carriage or auto to town risked one's life--and the lives of one's family--in most areas of the Jim Crow South.

Many African Americans coped with the virulent racism of their lives by attempting to appease whites as much as possible and by avoiding them whenever possible. The story of **Isaiah Montgomery** of Mississippi is a fascinating case in point. He was the prosperous son of **Benjamin Montgomery**, the once favorite slave of **Jefferson Davis'** brother, **Joseph Davis**. In the Reconstruction era, Montgomery's father tried to establish a communal colony of former Davis slaves on a bend in the Mississippi river, known as Davis Bend. After his father's death and the failure of the Davis Bend Colony, Montgomery lived as a prosperous merchant and a "fusion" politician in Vicksburg, meaning that he enjoyed the support of white Democrats because he did not overtly challenge the customs of white superiority.

In 1888, he established a colony of black farmers in the Yazoo Delta, on land purchased at bargain prices from a railroad company building a new line from Memphis to Vicksburg. He named the town Mound Bayou, because of the large Indian burial mound nearby, and the community of over 800 black families prospered for over 30 years as an isolated black community. Montgomery based his town on the idea that African Americans could only prosper in the Jim Crow South if they isolated completely from the white world. He argued that blacks needed to concentrate on economic self-sufficiency rather than social or political equality with whites. The town included black-owned banks, stores, newspapers, mills, restaurants, and a black college modeled after Tuskegee Institute, the black normal and agricultural school founded by Booker T. Washington. In all things related to whites, Montgomery advocated appeasement and isolation. For over 40 years, elected black mayors, black sheriffs, and black local officials governed this all-black community in the **Yazoo Delta** of Mississippi.

When the State convened a constitutional convention in 1890 to eliminate the black vote altogether in Mississippi, Montgomery was the only black representative seated. To the shock of African Americans in the State and nation, Montgomery supported the convention's imposition of poll taxes, literacy tests, and other measures to disfranchise the State's black population. In a long and eloquent speech justifying his vote of support, Montgomery explained that he hoped "to bridge a chasm that has been widening and deepening for a generation ..." He was willing to sacrifice the black vote if it would end the "grave dangers" of race conflict and the terror under which Mississippi blacks were forced to live. His critics in the North and many southern blacks accused him of having betrayed his race.

Montgomery went on to live a prosperous and influential life after 1890, even though he never held state office again. His friendship with Booker T. Washington, on whom he had modeled his accommodationist approach, made him a favorite among conservative white Republicans and Democrats alike. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him collector of government monies in the State, and he helped found, with his friend Booker T. Washington, the National Negro Business League. On a train trip through the South, Roosevelt stopped at **Mound Bayou** in 1907

and spoke to the community for ten minutes. His speech praising Montgomery and the independent black colony made national headlines. White racists thought of Montgomery as one of the "sensible darkies," while other supporters praised his practical efforts to improve the conditions of blacks in the State without risking lives in the process.

Colleges and Universities

The numerous black private and public colleges that sprang up in the South after the Civil War manifested, in sharp images, the accommodationist posture adopted by men like Isaiah Montgomery. By 1890, the nation had established 17 black colleges; within a decade another 64 were added for a total of 81 by 1899. The South held 75 of these African-American schools. These colleges usually were one of four types: public or state-supported, land grant supported, church affiliated, and non-church-related private schools. The increased number after 1890 was partly due to the passage of the **Morrill Land Grant Acts in 1862 and 1890**. These laws provided federal support to those black colleges offering courses in agriculture, engineering, and home economics, or the industrial or vocational arts.

Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College of Mississippi secured the first federal grant in 1871. Three other black colleges received funding in the following 16 years: **Virginia State College** at Petersburg; the Normal, **Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina**; and the **Kentucky State Industrial College** at Frankfort. In 1892, 16 black colleges gained significant funding from the second Morrill Act, passed in 1890. The overall impact of these new colleges was profound but not dramatic. Before 1876, only 314 blacks held college or professional degrees in the nation. From 1890 to 1929, the number of blacks holding college degrees climbed from 3700 to nearly 25,000. Southern black colleges matriculated just 131 graduates in 1900, and they enrolled a total of only 1700 students.

Many of these southern schools modeled their curriculum on the **Hampton-Tuskegee Idea**, based on the theories of the white northerner, **Samuel Chapman Armstrong**, and nurtured by a former slave, Booker T. Washington, in his Tuskegee Normal and Industrial institute, established in 1881, in Alabama. In 1868, Armstrong founded **Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia**, and the school, thereafter, educated hundreds of African Americans as teachers--although not all of them held full college degrees. Education at Hampton was marked by a philosophy of self-support, in which students performed the manual labor, including farming, to run the school. Armstrong believed that black teachers needed to internalize steady work habits, practical knowledge, and Christian morals, which they, in turn, could transmit to their students in the South's public schools. It was based, too, upon the theory that blacks should avoid politics or crossing the color line socially separating the races. This normal school concept, sometimes called the industrial model of vocational education, attracted significant funding from outside the South, partly, but not completely, because of its accommodating perspective on black education and politics. The fact that the chapel walls at Hampton carried the pictures of Robert E. Lee and Andrew Johnson suggest, for example, the lengths to which Armstrong went in recognizing the prevailing notions of white superiority.

Hampton's most successful graduate, Booker T. Washington, organized Tuskegee Institute, a normal school modeled on the Hampton ideal. By 1900, Washington had become the most celebrated and most powerful African American in the nation, principally due to his separatist theories of education and the support offered to him by wealthy, northern white philanthropists. Among his supporters were the camera manufacturer **George Eastman** and the steel baron **Andrew Carnegie**, perhaps the wealthiest man in American in 1900. Students attending Tuskegee learned about soil conservation and crop rotation techniques, the importance of not borrowing money at usurious rates from merchant suppliers, personal hygiene, and how to save their money at black-owned banks (there were 20 black-owned banks in the South in 1911). But, Washington refused to allow his students to be educated in the liberal arts. Instead, Tuskegee's male students studied carpentry, printing, brick-making, and agricultural economics, while

females took courses in domestic skills such as laundry, sewing, and cooking. The Tuskegee model hoped to send literate and practically-minded teachers into the black public schools of the South as men and women endowed with the important goal of uplifting an impoverished black peasantry to the status of independent, middle-class farmers.

Recent scholarship indicates that most black colleges and universities did not subscribe to the Hampton-Tuskegee model. Indeed, most black private and many public colleges, while including manual training courses in their curriculums, downplayed the industrial arts in favor of the liberal arts. This was especially true of those schools supported by churches, the various missionary organizations (like the **American Missionary Association**), and some northern philanthropists. Schools such as **Fisk University** in Nashville, **Talladega**, **Tougaloo**, **Paul Quinn**, **Morris Brown**, **Clafin**, **Bennett**, and **Rust** educated their students in Latin, Greek, mathematics, literature, history, and the natural sciences.

Very few southern colleges or universities prior to 1900 openly advocated educating blacks to confront the South's racially oppressive political and social scene. After 1900, moreover, Booker T. Washington launched a major campaign, funded by wealthy northern supporters, to make the Hampton-Tuskegee accommodationist model the dominant one in black education throughout the South. Although he never succeeded in reaching his goal due to significant opposition from within the black community, the "Tuskegee Machine," which resembled a political machine, controlled resources, curriculum, a significant portion of the black press, and the appointment of black teachers in numerous public and private elementary and secondary schools for blacks in the nation.

Many of the black colleges and normal schools serving African Americans were hardly colleges at all. Because no public high schools for black children existed in most of the southern states, the typical black teacher's college included curricula at the secondary level. As late as 1915, no public high schools for blacks existed in Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, or Louisiana. Only one each existed in Florida, Delaware, and Maryland. Atlanta had none before the 1920s. Almost all southern blacks receiving a high school education prior to 1910 had graduated from private, usually church sponsored, schools.

Those primary schools that did exist in the Jim Crow South offered substandard curricula, often in dilapidated and falling down shacks. Educator Booker T. Washington described them as "wretched little hovels with no light or warmth or comfort of any kind." Black teachers' salaries fell far below those paid white teachers, and many of the teachers were educated just at the primary level, especially in the rural areas.

Moreover, the impoverished condition of most sharecropper families in the rural South meant that black children had difficulty attending school at all. Conditions were somewhat better in southern cities, but not much. Generally, between 60 to 75 percent of young black children attended primary schools in cities like New Orleans, Atlanta, Savannah, Mobile, Jackson, Charleston, Richmond, and Montgomery. Besides these hardships, most black schools offered a shortened school term so that the children could be off in late spring and early fall to help with weeding and picking the cotton fields. It was typical, as late as the 1950s, for black high schools in cities like Memphis to close down for weeks at a time when students were trucked to the country to pick cotton if labor was scarce.

The sad state of black education stemmed principally from white resistance to providing education to blacks. Many racist whites believed that education only made blacks "uppity." Others feared that black schools wasted resources because black people were incapable of benefiting from education in any case. Large numbers of whites feared that educated blacks would compete for the better-paying jobs available to the handful of skilled whites. Despite these tremendous hardships, black literacy rates (the ability to read and write) steadily climbed in the two or three

generations after the Civil War. They stood at seven percent at the end of slavery in 1865, but rose to 44 percent in 1890 and 77 percent in 1920.

Ironically, while racial segregation deprived most African-American students of a proper education, this period from 1890 to 1954 witnessed a kind of golden age of African-American education. In 1897, for example, African-American educators established the first major "learned society" controlled by blacks and aimed at intellectual recognition of black scholars--The American Negro Academy (ANA). Its prestigious members included **Alexander Crummell**, **Francis J. Grimke**, **William S. Scarborough**, **John Hope**, **William H. Crogman**, **John W. Cromwell**, and **James Weldon Johnson**. Spun off from this organization were the **Negro Society for Historical Research** (NSHR) and the **Association for the Study of Negro Life and History** (ASNLH), under the leadership of **Carter G. Woodson**. The NSHR, included among its members the notable **Arthur A. Schomburg**, for whom the Schomburg Institute of the New York Public Library is named today.

The NSHR established several important print sources for distributing African-American scholarship, much of which challenged the basic tenants of Jim Crow. For example, the ASNLH promoted the celebration of **Negro History Week** in the nation's schools and published the **Negro History Bulletin** for teachers and the **Journal of Negro History** for the publication of scholarly research. These organizations clearly demonstrate, within the shadow of Jim Crow, a flourishing vibrant attempt to express the highest ideals and standards of black scholarship-efforts that helped nourish a resiliency among black intellectuals and laid the groundwork for resistance and self-determination.

While few African-American students had the opportunity to complete their secondary education, there were notable black high schools that educated a generation of African-American leaders. The **M Street High School**, for example, in Washington D. C. equaled the very best of the white high schools in the nation. Such prominent persons as Charles Hamilton Houston, the civil rights attorney, graduated from M Street. Similar schools, like **Crispus Attucks** in Indianapolis and **Charles Sumner High** in St. Louis, were equally successful in educating black youths.

A handful of black colleges also achieved excellence in education during this period, most notably Fisk University (1865) in Memphis, **Howard University** (1868) in Washington, D. C., and **Morehouse College** (1867) in Atlanta, Georgia. A number of the intellectual leaders in the 1920s were fashioned by the education they received at such colleges. Fisk graduated W. E. B Du Bois, **Countee Cullen**, **Langston Hughes**, and **Zora Neale Hurston**; Howard awarded degrees to the Rhodes scholar and philosopher **Alain Locke**, and its faculty included such luminaries as **Sterling A. Brown**, author of *The Negro in American Fiction* (1938), and **Margaret Just Butcher**, author of *The Negro Caravan* (1941). Morehouse College's most famous student, **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, was only one of many outstanding graduates of quality black colleges and universities who excelled as leaders in the Jim Crow era.

The Black Church as a Source of Refuge and Self-Respect

Thousands of southern blacks survived Jim Crow by turning to their community-based churches for spiritual succor and social refuge. Black women found their church work personally fulfilling and an extension of their private lives into the public sphere of their black communities. The typical church service, even those in the more formalized Roman Catholic churches, was a thing of joyful participation, filled with laughter, shouts of "Amen," sorrowful proclamations, and rousing songs. The black church allowed even the most impoverished black members to partake of leadership, social recognition, and fellowship in ways that helped sustain and nourish them in the face of Jim Crow's impact upon their lives.

In rural, town, and urban communities the black church offered an arena totally under the control of black members. As soon as the Civil War ended, southern blacks set up their own churches, usually within the existing Protestant and Catholic faiths. They formed separate congregations and associations, refusing to continue participating in segregated seating arrangements in the white-led churches. For example, the Methodist church claimed 200,000 black members in 1860. During the war, the number dropped to 50,000 and by 1866, those remaining organized an independent church. This pattern of separation and independence reflected the dissatisfaction felt by most African Americans with the white practices of "discrimination at the altar," segregated seating arrangements, prejudice during services, and patronizing sermons that urged blacks to accept slavery or a caste status of inferiority to whites.

Besides addressing spiritual needs, most black churches also addressed their members' material needs. Typically, churches ministered to the sick and the elderly, took up special collections for the destitute, and encouraged members to share what they had with each other in times of need. Churches also provided an array of services not available elsewhere. Many of the "store-front" churches in northern cities helped members find jobs, taught them domestic skills like sewing, and even sponsored guest lecturers and preachers. Many of the black churches also sponsored or published newspapers that circulated widely among black Americans. To be a member of a black church was to have a common identity, a means of spiritual escape, and a place of refuge that frequently offered rewarding and practical services.

Southern black ministers, like the educators at the black schools, usually avoided challenging white supremacy directly. Even subtle comments could invite horrible consequences. Instead, most black clergymen in the South, like their white counterparts, stressed middle-class values and a fundamentalist reading of the Bible; they preached atonement and the "mending of one's ways as a sinner." It was different in the North, where black ministers used their pulpits to promote social activism along with the traditional fundamentalism common to southern Protestants, both black and white.

This non-confrontational type of preaching sat well with most southern blacks, but there were some exceptions. **Henry McNeal Turner**, a bishop in the AME church and the president of Morris Brown College in Atlanta, actively criticized white supremacy and lynching. Upon hearing that the Supreme Court in 1883 had ruled unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875, Turner lashed out in anger, saying that the Constitution was little more than "a dirty rag, a cheat, a libel and ought to be spat upon by every Negro in the land." He showed little tolerance for white views, and he once asserted that "God is a Negro," not some "white-skinned, blue-eyed, projecting-nosed, compressed-lipped, and finely robed white gentleman."

Most southern blacks were Baptists, numbering around 1,300,000 in 1890. Second in number to the Baptist church membership, was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church, which attracted 366,000 members; followed by the African Methodist Episcopal membership of 310,000. Methodists and Presbyterians numbered around 120,000 each. Roman Catholics were far fewer and concentrated principally in urban areas. Only the Pentecostal Churches within the emerging Holiness Movement were somewhat integrated; and, they also allowed for the ordination of women. The attraction of the Holiness Movement lay in the belief that its members could partake of the "perfect love of Christ" by means of special blessings. The lively music—including ragtime, jazz, and the blues—played at Holiness services was also part of its appeal.

In the urban North, black churches of a different sort sprang up, helping African-American migrants from the rural South adjust to city life. The black churches also offered blacks a sense of identity while holding up the banners of justice and equality as goals worth fighting for. One of the most important new black churches that emerged in northern cities was the Nation of Islam, led by Timothy Drew, who took the name Noble Drew Ali, and Wallace D. Fard, or **Master Farad Muhammad**. In 1934, after establishing the Temple of Islam in Detroit, his disciple, Elijah Poole, renamed Elijah Muhammad by Fard, took over and eventually relocated his church to Chicago

after World War II. The movement's most famous disciple was Malcolm Little, the son of a Baptist preacher who grew up in Lansing, Michigan. Little embraced the teachings of Elijah Muhammad while serving a prison term in the 1940s, changing his name to Malcolm X in 1952. His leadership of a Harlem temple and his brilliant oratory and intelligence soon made him the leading spokesperson for the Nation until his break with its leader in 1964.

The Nation of Islam taught a form of **Black Nationalism** in response to the demeaning claims, practices, and laws of Jim Crow, contending that civilization had sprung from the Nile Valley of Egypt and that black people were the Earth's original inhabitants. White people, according to the Nation of Islam, were an evil subset of humanity who proved so incorrigible they were banished to Europe around 6000 years ago. In the subsequent passing of time, the inherently evil whites had committed horrible crimes against humanity, the worst being the enslavement of black people. The Nation taught its members to prepare for the day when they would overthrow whites by adhering to a strict code of behavior rooted in traditional family values and Islamic beliefs, including a diet that excluded pork.

Another "alternative" black religious group that emerged in the black ghettos of northern cities was the Peace Mission Movement founded by Father Major Jealous Devine (born George Baker in Savannah). His church, based in Harlem, held lavish communal banquet tables at which hundreds of followers dined each Sunday while listening to promises of heaven-on-earth sermons. Devine preached against social injustices and racism, and urged his followers to political action, hard work, and a life style based on honesty, sobriety, and sexual abstinence. During the Depression, he provided meals and shelter for countless numbers of homeless and hungry people. His church offered a menu of traditional Protestant values along with jobs and incomes for his followers that grew out of his savvy investments in real estate and housing projects, which he called "heavens" for the poor. Among the most articulate advocates of social justice, Devine worked vigorously to support a federal anti-lynching law in the 1930s. Like the Nation of Islam, the Peace Movement was a direct response to the Jim Crowism of white America, offering hope and refuge for its members in the face of white discrimination and racism.

Self-help Associations, African-American Enterprise, Community Activism

Before 1890, many southern blacks organized self-help associations that functioned as parallel institutions to those in the white community, ranging from lodges and social clubs to volunteer fire departments. Dozens of black owned-insurance companies, savings and loan associations, and municipal civic groups, such as the **Masons and Knights of Pythias**, emerged in nearly every southern town by 1900. These segregated black institutions served as refuge and safe harbors from white terror and violence, thereby enabling their black, largely middle-class participants to live amongst one another in dignity and with self-respect.

Although these associations were the product of segregation, especially after 1900, they were also preferred places that allowed for black autonomy and protection from a hostile white world. Black lodges and clubs and community groups, often connected to churches and schools, were somewhat voluntary in that many blacks, in the years immediately after the Civil War, did not want to associate with whites--especially not with their former masters. Freely voluntary association of this sort was one thing, of course, while customary and legally-enforced segregation was quite another. The former held no mark of humiliation or inequality for members, while the latter was based solely upon it.

Segregation limited opportunities for African Americans, but it also enabled many black men and women to profit from providing services to the black community that whites did not provide. The idea of "buying black" allowed for the establishment of black-owned banks, insurance companies, newspapers, retail stores, and service establishments such as barber shops, funeral parlors, dental offices, medical offices, restaurants, boarding houses, and beauty salons. Every black community of any size in southern towns and cities had a black main street occupied by black

businesses distinct from the white business district. Prior to 1900, many of these clusters of segregated black neighborhoods were somewhat "voluntary as blacks sought out their own kind," according to historian Howard N. Rabinowitz.

Many of these businesses grew large and prosperous, such as the operations of Atlanta building contractor Alexander Brown, whose firm built upper-class houses, parts of the Morris Brown College campus, and downtown office buildings. The founder of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company--the largest black stock company in the world--**Alonzo Herndon**, a former slave, built his single barbershop into a fashionable tonsorial empire, serving white clientele in Atlanta and employing up to 75 men. **H. A. Loveless** of Montgomery, Alabama, owned butcher shops, funeral homes, a hack and dray company, coal and wood yards, and extensive real estate. **Maggie Lena Walker**, the wealthiest black woman in America, was the founder and chief executive of St. Luke's Penny Savings Bank of Richmond, Virginia. **Madame C. J. Walker** parlayed a door-to-door sales business of a hair formula that, according to her claim, "nourished" rather than straightened the hair of black women into a million dollar business in beauty products, employing thousands of black men and women. Born an impoverished farm hand in Louisiana in 1867, Walker established her company's headquarters in Indianapolis, where the business prospered beyond what anyone thought possible for a black enterprise run by a black woman in Jim Crow America. She died a millionaire in 1915.

But, it was the thousands of little family-run retail stores, insurance agency shops, barber and beauty shops, law offices, and funeral parlors that composed the backbone of a small but resilient black middle class. In Natchez, Mississippi, for example, Dr. William Johnston, the grandson of a prosperous free black barber who had been born a slave, enjoyed the respect of both whites and blacks in the town, even though he cared for only black patients. And, **John R. Lynch**, the most powerful black politico in the State of Mississippi during Reconstruction, moved to Chicago, where he practiced law successfully for black clients over the next 20 years, after the State disfranchised black voters,.

Additionally, African-American men and women found strength from their participation in community organizations like the Elks, Knights of Pythias, Masons, Odd Fellows, and many others. Black men enjoyed fellowship and a sense of cosmopolitanism by virtue of their membership, especially when they traveled to national and regional conferences; and, being an Elk was a mark of distinction in small-town America. For aspiring black politicians in the North, especially after 1900, membership in volunteer fire brigades and fraternal orders was almost a requirement for gaining political support. In every town of any size, black women, who also made up the majority of active members in black churches, were members of benevolent societies such as the Daughters of Bethlehem and Sisters of Charity. When the **National Association of Colored Women's Clubs** was established in 1896, hundreds of black women throughout the nation formed a network dedicated to "lifting as we climb."

Stepping From Behind the Veil

Eventually, such associations, black colleges, all-black communities, and autonomous black churches helped set the stage for more than mere survival during the era of Jim Crow. They also promoted a consciousness among blacks and a sense of solidarity that produced new forms of resistance in the years after 1900. To take one example, the African-American writer **Paul Laurence Dunbar**, whose volume of poetry, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, made him the most popular poet in America after its publication in 1896, also published one of the first protest poems in the Jim Crow era. His black "dialect poetry," built upon the so-called white "plantation tradition" in literature, identified with the Georgia journalist Joel Chandler Harris's obsequious "Uncle Remus" stories of black life in slavery. Like Harris's tales, Dunbar's poetry appeased white sensibilities, but it also lifted the mode of dialect poetry to a level of respectability for traditional folk tales rooted in an enslaved-American past.

But, all of Dunbar's poetry is not of this sort. Indeed, in 1895, at the very moment he was presenting a dialect poetry acceptable to white audiences comfortable with the Uncle Remus stories, Dunbar published one of the first African-American protest poems, entitled "We Wear the Mask." It is a powerful attack on the ever-present veil imposed upon black Americans by the dominant white culture, and it anticipates the coming generation of black legal, literary, and political resistance to Jim Crow that began to express itself at almost every level of society by 1900. Indeed, the new century was a turning point for black Americans as they stepped forcefully from behind the mask.

The consciousness-raising implications of Dunbar's "Mask" poem was given theoretical shape two years later with the publication of Du Bois' powerful essay entitled "The Strivings of the Negro People." This essay, along with his *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in the late 1890s but published in 1903, sent a clarion call to black Americans, urging them to step from behind the veil, even at the risk of their lives. After 1900, the Jim Crow era would become a contest for the very soul of the nation as African Americans increasingly resisted its mantle.

We Wear the Mask
We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream other wise,
We wear the mask.

--Paul Laurence Dunbar (1895)

Questions to Ponder:

1. Some historians think that the "trickster rabbit" in the Uncle Remus stories popularized by Joel Chandler Harris is a good example of duping your opponent by pretending to be something you are not by living behind the "veil." In the Brer Rabbit stories, the trickster rabbit is always fooling Brer Fox and the Brer Bear--the adversaries who represent white masters, overseers, and bosses. The Rabbit uses his brains and cunning to trick the more powerful animals. He usually does this by pretending to be stupid or foolish. Can you think of examples in which blacks in the Jim Crow era might use the mask of docility and inferiority to actually come out on top in confrontations with whites? Do you ever do this in your own life? Is it healthy to have to live by your wit this way? Is this similar to being street smart? In such a society, whom can you trust?
2. What actions might black parents have taken to teach their children to disguise their true selves when around white people? Give some examples. Do you think that this runs the risk of children internalizing the mask to the point where the "act" becomes real? Do some research on the evidence provided in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*

- Supreme Court case by the sociologists who worked with the plaintiff's legal team? What kind of evidence was used? What does it say about the impact on the personality of black children who were forced to act and live as inferior people in the presence of whites?
3. Select five historically black colleges from five different southern states. See if you can put them into the categories of the Industrial-Tuskegee model or the Liberal Arts model. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Why? Now create your own college for young adults just out of slavery. What would the curriculum look like? Where would you locate it? Who would be its teachers? Which students would you allow to enroll? What would be its philosophy or purpose of education? And where would you get the money to create and operate such a school?
 4. Research the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church. Do the same for the Peace Movement Church founded by Father Major Jealous Divine. How do they compare in terms of purpose, organization, membership, and leadership? Why do you think that each church appealed to its membership? What did each church offer? Now think of yourself as a newly freed African American in 1863 living in Mississippi. What kind of church would you want to join? To create? Or to leave? Explain your answer. Now imagine yourself a black migrant from Georgia who has just arrived in Harlem, New York. What kind of church would you want to join? To create? To leave? Why are your answers the same or different in each case?
 5. Let's pretend that you are an ambitious young black person living in the South during the height of Jim Crow with all its segregation, violence, and loss of political rights. How are you going to become a wealthy person? A millionaire by the age of 30? What would you do? Why? Before answering your question, research the lives of five substantially wealthy African-American men and women in 1920. How did they achieve their wealth regardless of Jim Crow?
 6. Which is more important? Social equality? Political equality? Or, economic equality? Why? How would you construct a community of all black or all white people to ensure one of the above, but not two or three? How would you achieve all three? Be specific. Think of the all-black town of Mound Bayou in Mississippi. Do some research on the town. Would you like to have lived there? Finally, which is better: a society of racial and ethnic diversity or one of racial or ethnic unity? Why?
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